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Review of Loreto Todd, *Some Day Been Dey: West African Pidgin Folktales*

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Review of Loreto Todd, *Some Day Been Dey: West African Pidgin Folktales*

Abstract

Neither the general bibliography on African oral literature by Harold Scheub, *African Oral Narratives, Proverbs, Riddles, Poetry, and Song* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1977), nor the more specific bibliography by Virginia and Mark Delancety, *A Bibliography of Cameroon Folklore*, an Occasional Publication of the Literature Committee of the African Studies Association (Waltham, Mass.: African Studies Association, 1972) list any collection of Pidgin narratives anywhere from Africa, let alone the Cameroon. Hence the significance of the present collection of tales. Yet its import extends beyond the sheer textual documentation of narrative in a language, the use of which, it has been generally assumed, is reserved to trade and commerce situations. Todd suggests and briefly describes the use of Pidgin in social situations in which the mother tongue is regularly spoken, "In Bamenda Grass-fields and in the coastal communities Pidgin is used in church, in the market, on public transport, in intertribal gatherings, among educated and uneducated, for proverbs, for work-chants, for storytelling, and for creating an atmosphere of intimacy" (p.6).

Disciplines

African Languages and Societies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History

Comments

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Loreto Todd. *Some Day Been Dey: West African Pidgin Folktales*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979. xii, 186 pp. maps. \$14.25 (paper).

Neither the general bibliography on African oral literature by Harold Scheub, *African Oral Narratives, Proverbs, Riddles, Poetry, and Song* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1977), nor the more specific bibliography by Virginia and Mark Delancey, *A Bibliography of Cameroon Folklore*, an Occasional Publication of the Literature Committee of the African Studies Association (Waltham, Mass.: African Studies Association, 1972) list any collection of Pidgin narratives anywhere from Africa, let alone the Cameroon. Hence the significance of the present collection of tales. Yet its import extends beyond the sheer textual documentation of narrative in a language, the use of which, it has been generally assumed, is reserved to trade and commerce situations. Todd suggests and briefly describes the use of Pidgin in social situations in which the mother tongue is regularly spoken. "In Bamenda Grass-fields and in the coastal communities Pidgin is used in church, in the market, on public transport, in intertribal gatherings, among educated and uneducated, for proverbs, for work-chants, for storytelling, and for creating an atmosphere of intimacy" (p. 6). The opportunity to narrate in Pidgin arises "in many mixed communities and in households where visitors do not always share the family's mother tongue; [then] Pidgin is a usual medium and many of the raconteurs first heard the tales in Pidgin" (p. 12).

It becomes apparent that in anglophone Cameroon and the Bamenda Grassfield, Pidgin English is no longer, technically speaking, a pidgin language, but rather a *lingua franca*, in the process of functioning the way Swahili does in East Africa. Moreover, most of the narrators whose tales are in this volume learned Pidgin in their childhood. They are practically bilingual and for them Pidgin is a creole language.

Todd glosses over these fine distinctions, being carried away by the very novelty of the texts. The collection is oriented toward Pidgin English and excludes to some extent consideration of the narrators' native languages. There are only occasional and unsystematic references to Lamso and Bafut as the languages that some of the storytellers spoke. Todd also neglects the native literary and cultural traditions of the narrators. In the extensive notes, Todd implies that the tales are basically translations from several local languages and were not created in Pidgin. The evidence for that is exclusively linguistic, hardly literary or thematic. Whenever there are comparative notes as, for example, in Tale 3, "Tortoise and Elephant: Smallness is not an Illness," they are references to other publications in pidgin and creole languages, as if they have an independent narrative tradition.

The fact of the matter is that most of the tales belong to the international narrative tradition and to the African stock of tales. For example, Tale 3, just mentioned, is motif K 22 or "Deceptive tug-of-war" according to Stith Thompson in *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, 1955-1957). This motif was recorded in several traditions in Africa, in the West Indies, and in the United States, particularly in the black community. Similarly, Tale 4, "Tortoise and Hare: Intelligence beats Strength" is Motif K11.1 or "Race won by deception: relative helpers" which has been documented in many parts of the world and particularly in Africa. For this specific tale, some comparative analysis might have yielded significance. In the notes Todd comments that the hare is a rare figure in Cameroon tales which is true since the hare is the trickster figure of Bantu speakers in Central Africa, not in West Africa (see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Oxford, 1970, p. 337). Hence, the contest

between tortoise and hare in this story might be interpreted as rivalry between tricksters of two distinct traditions.

It is possible to continue supplementing Todd's notes with comparative information. Tale 5 "Tortoise, Goat and Leopard: A Corpse has Few Desires," is an example of Tale Type 51 or "The Lion's Share" that, according to Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, in *The Types of the Folktale*, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 184 (Helsinki, 1961) has been known in the international folk traditions since Aesopic fables (see B. E. Perry, *Aesopica*, No. 149, 1952); Tale 8, "Greed Will be Your Downfall," is Tale Type 34A or "Dog Drops His Meat for the Reflection;" tale 9, "Stubbornness Does Not Pay," is Tale Type 202 or "The Two Stubborn Goats"; tale 11, "A Fated Animal Does not See the Hunter," is Tale Type 155 or "The Ungrateful Serpent Returns to Captivity." A version of this tale type was recorded in the Cameroon at the turn of the century and was published in Wilhelm Lederbogen, *Kameruner Märchen* (Berlin, 1901). Tale 12, "When the Hand Rubs the Foot, the Foot Rubs the Hand in Return" is Motif B210.2 or "Talking animal refuses to talk on demand;" tale 14, "Sun, Night and Moon," is Motif A716.1 or "Four suns at first: culture hero shoots three down"; tale 16, "The Scabby Child," is Tale Type 560 or "The Magic Ring"—a widely spread folktale, and Tale 23 "Bibaiyibaiyi and the Papa-Water" is Tale Type 425M or "Bathing Girl's Garment Kept"—a common African variation on the Cupid and Psyche theme.

These references that supplement Todd's linguistic discussions of the texts would hopefully be of some bibliographical use for African Folklorists. However, the more crucial purpose of their citation here is to draw attention to the fact that so far Pidgin folktales are verbal translations of narrative themes that exist in African traditions. Such a literary observation has ramifications for the linguistic concerns with pidgin languages because it emphasizes the need to view those languages as anglicized local languages rather than a corrupted English.

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II. SPECIALIZED STUDIES OF AFRICAN FICTION AND NON-FICTION

J. C. Anafulu. "Chinua Achebe: A Preliminary Checklist." *Nsukka Library Notes* 3(1978). v, 52 pp. (437 citations).

A bibliography of a living and flourishing author is something of a thankless task, since it is bound to be superseded very shortly. If it is to have permanent value, it should be exhaustive for the period undertaken and offer the literary scholar a sound basis for research. This the present bibliography only partly achieves; the shortcoming